DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 106 980 EA 007 176

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TITLE Citizen Advisory Committees.
INSTITUTION Pennsylvania State Dept. of Education, Harrisburg. Bureau of Planning and Evaluation.
PUB DATE 75
NOTE 19p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS *Advisory Committees; Annotated Bibliographies; *Boards of Education; *Citizen Participation; *Community Involvement; Responsibility; *School Planning
IDENTIFIERS Pennsylvania

ABSTRACT

This guide, describing community involvement through citizen advisory committees, is a summary of the literature on such committees. Its main concern is district committees created by school boards. Citations in the bibliography contain all points of view on committees and present many alternatives on most of the topics covered in the guide. Citations marked with an asterisk are major works, and comments on each article or book cite its commendable features. (Author/MLF)

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Citizen Advisory Committees

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Pennsylvania Department of Education
1975

EA 007 176

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Introduction

The call for community involvement in school district activities has been heard for some time. In certain cases, community involvement is mandated by funding source requirements, such as ESEA Title I. It is also required by the Pennsylvania Department of Education's Guidelines for Long-Range Planning.

This guide, describing community involvement through citizen advisory committees, is not a comprehensive guide for the formation and operation of citizen advisory committees. Rather, it is a summary of the literature on such committees, including several excellent articles and handbooks on the formation and operation of citizen advisory committees. Some of these are noted in the appendix.

Why Citizen Advisory Committees?

At hearings before the Pennsylvania Citizens Commission on Basic Education, parents and community members often said that school board members and administrators cannot "be in touch" with all their publics, no matter how great their effort as individuals or as groups. This led the commission to recommend the formation of citizen advisory committees to advise boards on the educational issues and needs of the community.

Guidelines for Long-Range Planning requires citizen committees to work closely with professional staff in the development of long-range plans:

> "The process of long-range planning involves much more than the collection of information. Long-range planning requires the development of a process of community and staff involvement, continuous needs assessment, new and improved ways of meeting needs and a two-way communication system that keeps the community and the school constantly aware of what the other thinks. It implies a sincere look at what the community desires for the schools, its obligation and commitment to support those desires and a determination of how future needs are to be met."

School districts throughout the country have reported many benefits from working with committees

- Two-way communication between the district and the community was improved.
- A job was done at little cost to taxpayers.
- Community (public) relations were improved.
- Program acceptance by the community was improved.
- Community gained more confidence in the work of the schools.
- Educational needs were identified, related problems solved and more relevant curriculum was developed.
- Educational policy was improved.
- Morale in school and community rose.
- The administration and board appreciated the power and ability of the people to contribute to the district's operations.
- Recommendations of citizen committees often prevented issues from becoming critical.

. Better cooperation and understanding were created among various community agencies.

Dispel Some Myths, Please

The citizen advisory committee (hereafter referred to as the committee) is created by a school board either for a specific purpose (ad hoc) or as a continuing advisory body to the board and administration. The minutes of a school board meeting should outline the charge to the committee.

The committee, being advisory in nature, has neither administrative nor policy-making authority; it can only recommend. In fact, a committee's major purpose should be to study a particular topic or, in the case of a continuing committee, study topics assigned and make recommendations to the administration and board.

When given a charge by the board, ad hoc committees should be informed of the time limitations of the study and of the fact that, after a certain date, the committee will be disbanded. The continuing committee should be used wisely by the administration and board in instances when community input is vital to a decision or process.

The committee is not another board of school directors, nor is it intended to displace or replace board thinking, action or responsibility for policymaking, nor is it intended to replace the function of the superintendent in relationship to the board. Continuing committees in particular can become more powerful than expected, even when membership is rotated every two or three years. This guide strongly suggests the use of ad hoc rather than continuing committees.

Some Background

Studies indicate that there are basically two kinds of committees: districtwide and school attendance area committees. This guide is mostly concerned with district committees, though more information on school area committees can be found in several articles noted in the appendix. This guide is also concerned only with those committees created by school boards, although groups formed by concerned citizens can, at times, be very effective as well.

Committees can be used to study almost anything:

. Educational philosophy for the district.

. Long-range planning--priorities, assessing needs.

. Significant curriculum revision or additions--sex education or family-living programs, drug education, gifted education.

. Major organizational changes.

. New activity--open education, year-round school.

. Bond issues, budgets, other financial matters.

. School construction and building programs; site selection.

. Transportation.

. Desegregation.

. Decentralization or consolidation.

. Use of school facilities, community school.

. Staffing, salary scales, other personnel matters.

. Student behavior--rights and responsibilities, discipline, smoking.

. Vocational and adult education.

. Federal programs.

. Special education.

. Human relations--ethnic, racial.

A school board can determine for itself whether it must create an ad hoc committee to study a topic or whether a continuing advisory committee should be given an additional or new topic to study. Whatever the topic, committees are most effective when they are created for major purposes rather than little tasks and when they are used for consultation instead of operation. Efficacy begins to fail when a committee becomes entangled with the details of running a school or district.

There are no set models for the creation, operation and use of a committee. Each differs, of course, because school districts differ. The suggestions in this guide should be only the beginning of a school board's consideration of a committee.

Danger!

Misuse of committees sometimes leads to disaster:

. Citizens interfere in legislative and administrative matters reserved for elected board members.

. Disgruntled minorities emerge.

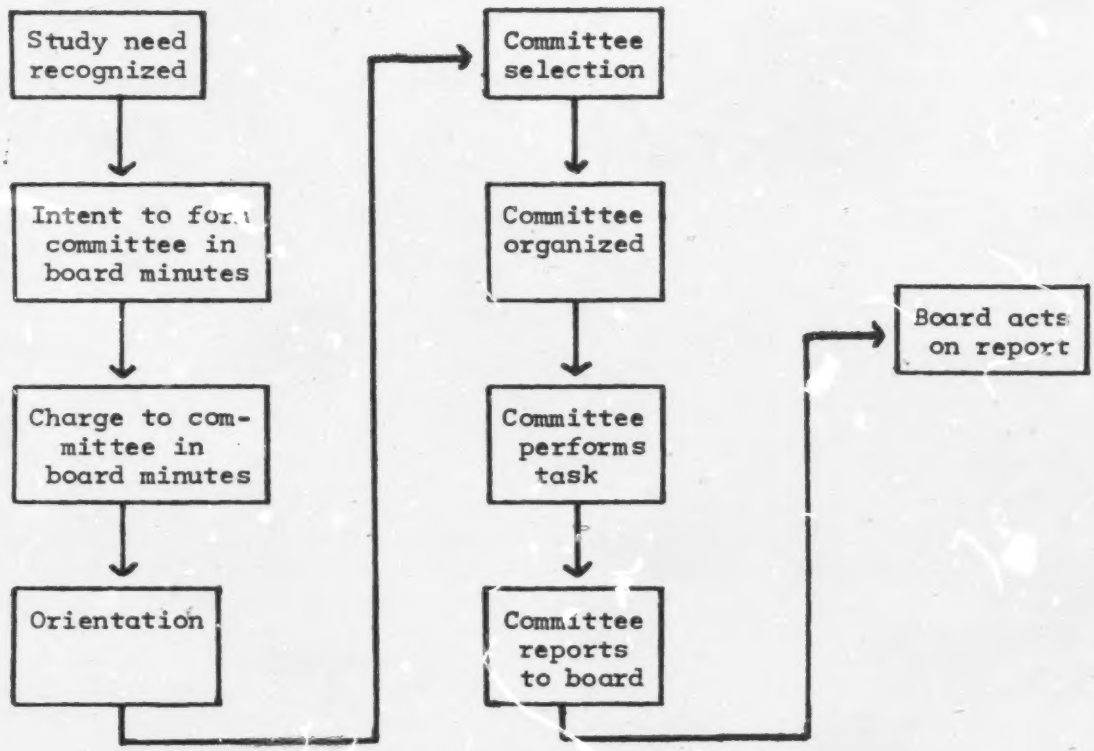
- Morale is damaged.
- Participants lose confidence in the board or the superintendent.
- Committees become pressure groups.
- Boards feel obligated to accept recommendations which could not be approved.
- Committees become "rubber stamps" for the board.
- Committees become shock absorbers of criticism of the district.
- Committees become promoters for board projects.

Important precautions which can prevent misuse include:

- The board and staff must sincerely seek citizen participation and not use it for "rubber stamp" purposes.
- The administrator should not dominate activities.
- The committee should broadly represent the community when necessary, as in long-range planning.
- The committee should be brought into the picture during developmental stages, not after a program has been developed.
- Committee members, board members, district personnel and the public-at-large should be kept informed of progress.
- Attention should be given by the administrator to scheduling committee meetings at convenient times, making members feel their ideas count, providing suitable office space and clerical help, orienting members to their duties and limitations and informing members when their job is complete.

How Should a Citizen Advisory Committee Work?

There are no set formulas or procedures for the operation of advisory committees. However, here are some sample milestones in the life of a citizen advisory committee:



More Detail, Please

1. Administration and board recognize the need for a larger study of, or a broader information base on, a topic than their present capabilities allow.

   When boards become involved in several weighty issues at one time, the administration and board members can feel overburdened by the need to thoroughly investigate each issue and to make rational judgments on an almost impossible number of facts. After discussing the means to obtain as much information as possible on each of the issues, the board may take any one of several actions: (1) table the matter until a later date; (2) appoint a subcommittee of the board to investigate an issue; (3) hire a consultant to probe another issue; (4) appoint a citizen advisory committee to investigate one of the issues or (5) all or none of the above. The board can decide to refer the matter to a committee if guidelines require it, such as long-range planning guidelines; if no other body or agency in the community or area is studying the topic or if this is the type of problem

which is properly studied by a citizens committee and not by another person or agency.

Boards should also heed two cautions: don't lean too heavily on too many committees for too many recommendations which should come from the board itself, and be prepared to keep in close contact with the committee--even work in concert with its members at times--for best results. In defense of the use of a committee, however, is the fact that often a strong citizen advisory committee has prevented the formation of special interest pressure groups which can do damage in a tense situction.

2. Board places in the minutes the intent to form an ad hoc committee or to request its continuing advisory committee to assume a new task.

Board members should feel a definite need for citizen input on any major concern. When the board decides that an advisory committee is necessary and the intent to form a committee is placed in the minutes, wise use of the committee must be evident. Boards must clearly state the purpose of the committee and must be certain that they do not use it as a "rubber stamp" for their ideas or that they give only cursory attention to the recommendations of the committee and reject its report without substancial explanation. Nothing erodes board-community relations more quickly than good-faith committee recommendations being summarily rejected by the board. Trust and respect must be present at all times during board-committee activities. The board must also be willing to commit the required resources, dollars and other support, to the committee.

3. Board places in minutes (at same or later meeting) the charge given to the committee.

The charge should include (1) a clear, concise statement of the problem and the objective of the committee; (2) a time period for the study, including a deadline (ad hoc committee) or a suggested calendar (continuing committee) and (3) the form of the final report or other reports. The minutes should also stipulate the projected membership of the committee--number and representation--the method(s) of selection of these members and the types of support which the board will offer.

What method(s) of selection will be used and how will these insure representativeness? While a cross-section of community representatives may be needed for

some studies, such as long-range or curriculum planning, persons with specific skills and talents may have to be invited to participate, such as a nutritionist on a food services investigation committee.

What is the time period allotted for the study? In some cases, two to six months is enough time for a committee to make a valid study of a topic and still insure that committee members will not tire of their task. Of course, longer and sometimes continuing studies are often necessary.

What will happen as a result of the study? What support will the board give the committee: meeting room, clerical assistance, authority to hear testimony and to collect information from the files, transportation?

4. Administration and board orient community to the task and clearly indicate the various types of involvement believed necessary for its successful completion.

The board should explain in detail the proposed committee plan to the community in as many hearings, open meetings, newspaper articles and special mailings as possible so that a substantial cross-section of the community is informed. School district public relations channels should provide enough information so interested persons can decide whether they wish to become involved in the committee's activities. A call for volunteers may help. As noted in step 3, the board should, if necessary, invite persons with specific skills to participate, and it should, if representativeness is desirable, try to reach publics not before reached for other undertakings. The board should determine the desirable size of the committee and make certain that all who become involved realize that the board and the committee share responsibility for setting the ground rules of the study, and that these basic rules can only be revised on agreement by both parties.

5. Committee members are selected by projected method(s).

Among the most popular are (1) appointment by the board; (2) volunteering; (3) election by parents and/or citizens; (4) choice by community organizations of various types--Parent Teacher Association, Lions, League of Women Voters, American Association of University Women, etc.--and (5) appointment by the professional staff. Many districts have used two or more methods, and the variations within each are endless, as are the terms of members. Often a continuing committee will appoint its own new members as terms expire.

The National School Public Relations Association's publication, Citizens Advisory Committees, is an excellent source on selection methods. It cautions that the more informal the selection method, the less substantive the work of the committee. For instance, if there is a completely voluntary committee, the chances of it working well are less than if the board or administration and staff had appointed most of the members.

Another caution concerns representativeness. There is no magic formula for guaranteeing representation of all groups within the community, but the board must be certain that "community" is very broadly defined. It must be wary of "friends of the board" who can become "rubber stamps," but it must not forget friends and supporters. It should recruit members of hostile groups if possible, being certain they will address themselves to the task at hand. The board should try to involve previously noninvolved individuals by honest recruiting.

Some members of a committee should represent the school staff, the students, the parents, the business community and social or political groups. All members should have one characteristic in common: They should desire a change for the better for all children in the school district.

The number of committee members will vary, depending upon the task. Committees have had as few as six members and as many as 300. The larger ones are usually broken down into more workable subcommittees. The majority of committees had 15 to 45 members.

6. Committee organizes; ad hoc committee selects officers, writes bylaws, if necessary.

Committee members should be announced at a public meeting and begin to work as soon as possible. Members should elect officers, schedule meetings and draw up operating rules. A steering committee can head larger groups.

Officers generally elected are chairperson, assistant chairperson, recording secretary or documentarian and, if necessary, subcommittee chairpersons and a parliamentarian. The bylaws should include the committee's name and objectives, the requirements for membership, the selection method for members, terms of office and voting rights, a list of the officers and their duties, committee or subcommittee information, meeting schedules and attendance requirements. Short-term ad hoc committees may only need the barest of operating rules,

while continuing advisory committees should have a more structured organization.

7. Committee performs task outlined by board; administration and board support and assist committee when necessary and remain in constant contact with committee.

The committee has the responsibility to perform its stated function as efficiently as possible. It should keep the board informed of its progress and ask the board for special authority to collect data or to command necessary testimony. In the meantime, the board should support the committee by providing it (1) meeting space (on neutral ground, if necessary) that is comfortable and convenient; (2) clerical assistance; (3) consultant assistance, if necessary, and (4) any other special items, such as transportation or communications assistance. In many cases a good liaison person between board and committee has eased these tasks.

Problems of member apathy toward the task, poor attendance, scheduling conflicts, domination by a few persons or pressure groups and going off on irrelevant points can be overcome by a wise chairperson who (1) tries to maintain a positive attitude at all times; (2) considers others' busy schedules when determining meeting times and lengths; (3) involves each member and (4) plans meetings well with agendas sent out in advance. The board must keep in constant contact with the committee, encourage it to continue the task and periodically give the members public recognition. It can schedule committee progress reports at its regular meetings. The board should agree to release information about the committee's activities.

8. Committee sends final report and recommendations to board as required; continuing committee gets new or revised charge from board, as necessary.

The committee should present its final report to the board as requested. Should committee members not agree on all recommendations, to add a section on alternate procedures is preferable to a minority report, which could have the effect of dividing the board and district as well as the committee. Pros and cons of each alternative can be discussed in this section.

The report can be made public through established news channels at this time, and the committee members should be given recognition for their efforts as well. Dinners, awards, letters of thanks and certificates have

all been used as a means of recognizing committee members' contributions. An ad hoc committee can now be disbanded, and a continuing committee can be given a new or revised charge by the board.

9. Administration and board study report and act on appropriate recommendations.

As mentioned before, the board must act in good faith on the committee's recommendations, publicly stating its position on each recommendation and its reasons for pursuing or rejecting it. A sincere committee report with valid recommendations must be treated with like sincerity by the board. To do otherwise is to court deterioration of school-community relationships.

Appendix

This appendix lists the major articles and handbooks which were consulted for background material for this guide. It is not a lengthy bibliography, but a serious reader interested in learning more about citizen advisory committees should find it comprehensive. The citations contain all points of view on committees and present many alternatives on most of the topics covered in the guide. Citations marked with an asterisk (*) are major works on committees. Comments on each article or book cite its commendable features. Major pre-1964 writings on committees are not included, but may be found in the bibliographies of some of the works listed.

Biggs, C. W. Citizen Advisory Committees: Alfred I. DuPont School District. Wilmington, Delaware, 1973. 8 pages

Memo and text of speech on "how we did it"
Presents candid picture of problems and successes
Concerns committee set up in each school

Blumemberg, Eleanor. The School-Community Advisory Council: For Better or for Worse? Journal of Secondary Education, February 1971. pages 60-62

Concerns committees set up for a school
Good tips for principals

Burt, Samuel M. If You Want Me to Serve on a School Advisory Committee. PSBA Bulletin, September - October 1974. Volume 38, No. 5, pages 22-24

A look at committees from a prospective member's point of view

Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Report of the Citizens Commission on Basic Education. Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, PDE, November 1973. pages 113-115

Commission rationale and recommendations for establishment of committees

Crosby, Otis A. How to Get a Citizens Committee Going. Nation's Schools, November 1965. Volume 76, pages 50-51+

Overview of procedures for operating ad hoc committees
Samples: formal charge to committee; board statement of relationship to committee

Davies, Don et al. Citizen Participation in Education. Annotated Bibliography. Institute for Responsive Education, 704 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, Massachusetts 02215, 1974

Definitive annotated bibliography on all types of citizen participation

Dayton Advisory Council on Education (DACOE). Objectives and Bylaws of DACOE. Dayton, Ohio, no date. 9 pages

Sample: Bylaws

Fox Chapel Area School District. Charter for a Task Force on Exceptional Disciplire Problems. Fox Chapel, Pennsylvania, 1974. 7 pages

Sample: Bylaws

*Fusco, Gene C. Citizens Committees for Better Schools. Washington, D. C., U. S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, Government Printing Office, November 1964. 16 pages

Definitive early work; still very practical

Harner, Jack. Citizen Advisory Committees in Public School Education. Fauquier County, Virginia: Fauquier County Public Schools, April 1965. 22 pages

Study done for school board
Summary of major works before 1965
Bibliography

*Marlow, Frank. Putting Citizen Advisory Committees to Work in Your School. APSS Know How (newsletter), December 1970. Volume 22, pages 1-4

Overview offering practical suggestions
for success

Mort, Carson L., Chairperson. Report on Human Relations to the Wissahickon School District Board of School Directors by the Human Relations Task Force, 1971. 18 pages

Sample: Committee report

Muniz, Arthur J. But Citizens Committees Can Work. (All you need know is the knack.) American School Board Journal, November 1969. Volume 157, pages 41-43

Concise overview offering important "do's
and don'ts"

North Penn School District. A Second Report of the Citizen's Advisory Committee on Drug Abuse. North Penn School District, Pennsylvania, May 1974. 15 pages

Sample: Committee report

*Oldham, Neild B. et al. Citizens Advisory Committees: Public Participation Increase; Guide Changes in American Education. National School Public Relations Association, Arlington, Virginia, 1974. 56 pages

Complete guide for districts
Examples from districts throughout the country
Samples: Bylaws, board policy; administrative policy; letter to parents; membership application; evaluation form

Pennsylvania Department of Education. Guidelines for Long-Range Planning. How To Do It: A Manual to Assist Pennsylvania School Districts in the Long-Range Planning Process. Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, 1974.

Required reading for school district personnel

*Pennsylvania School Boards Association. Planned Community Involvement in School Decision-Making. Information Legislative Services, February 1972. Volume 10, pages 1-8

Practical questions for school boards to consider when debating the formation of a committee

School Management. How to Use Citizens Committees. School Management, February 1964. pages 94, 96 and 97

Ten steps for effective design and use of committees

*Stemnock, Suzanne K. Citizens Advisory Committees. AASA, National Education Association, Educational Research Service Circular No. 3, March 1968. 57 pages

Definitive presentation of data based on results of a survey